

33rd Sunday of the Year 2014

Matthew 25: 14-30

In *The Importance of Being Earnest* Act II, the title character Ernest is reported as dead in Paris. He is an entirely imaginary character, made up by his brother Jack to obscure the sowing of wild oats. But the other characters don't know this. So they try to console Jack. There is a clergyman on the scene whose pastoral style is incredibly bad. Absurdly named, Canon Chasuble, he has to say. "You would no doubt wish me to make some slight allusion to this tragedy next Sunday. [Jack presses his hand convulsively and Chasuble continues.] I can use my homily on the manna in the wilderness. My homily on the manna in the wilderness can be adapted to almost any occasion, joyful, or, as in the present case, distressing. I have given it at harvest celebrations, christenings, confirmations, on days of humiliation and days of festival. The last time I delivered it the Bishop was present. He was much struck by some of the analogies I drew."

I hope you will forgive my frivolity and irreverence. Maybe "excuse" it, as I will try to show that "forgiveness" is a deeper experience. My point is not the manna in the wilderness, which is a brilliant homily topic. Rather, today I have a homily "adaptable to almost any occasion." I call it my Forgiveness Homily. It crystallized for me in September. I used it (elsewhere) for Peter's question "how many times must I forgive my brother?" Last month I used it for the great commandment to love your neighbor. Since the archbishop *was* going to be present later that day I was asked at the last minute reduce it by two minutes. This required lopping off a brilliant introduction, but it still worked—though Canon Chasuble would have *not* been pleased.

Today I use it yet again, in a slightly different form. My forgiveness homily is framed by the parable of the talents. This is an end-times parable. It warns that we will be judged by how we use what we have been given. Surely the most important thing we are given is the content of our hearts. Do we bury that content in the dirt of resentment and uncharity? Or do we spend it generously by pouring out mercy? When necessary, do we attempt the laborious and difficult task of forgiveness—which is at the heart of Christian faith? I have three personal stories about forgiveness. I hope you can connect with one of them. It has taken twenty years to collect this material. I am about to blow it all in five minutes.

I said something unkind about my sister-in-law. I felt I was correct. She was offended. I didn't care. But I felt uncomfortable. Three years later, I humbled myself enough to say, "I am sorry for what I said." She said, "That's OK." I said, "It's not OK. But thank you for being big

enough not to hold it against me.” It was not right for her to dismiss it. I had to acknowledge my offense, and not make excuses. I am still not close to my sister-in-law, but I gained the chance to treat her as she deserves. I gained the chance to live as I deserve.

There was a friend who betrayed a confidence that embarrassed me. He said he was doing so for my own good. I thought this was baloney. I told him how angry I was on several occasions.

This was difficult; after doing the dirty deed he moved to another hemisphere. When he didn’t write back, my hostility increased. Five years later I learned he had a serious illness and might not recover. I wanted him to suffer, but not this much. I wrote with concern, but also I wished he could admit his wrong. I wished he hadn’t stopped writing. When he wrote back, we spoke heart to heart, across the oceans. I was no longer angry. He was glad too.

Both stories have happy endings. The third is imperfect, about a co-worker who wasn’t sorry.

There was bad chemistry between us from the moment we met, and I indulged my dislike. When the opportunity came to put me in my place, she did so with glee and severity. My thoughts I dare not tell. I developed a frigid compliance. When a career change took her away, I felt like Forrest Gump at the Lincoln memorial: “it was the happiest day of my life.” But she had gotten away with it. Eventually a professional meeting required we meet. I dreaded this. I was still in bondage. When the time came, each of us behaved cordially. That was all. That was enough. I was no longer bitter; it is history; I am free.

Each declaration of forgiveness took time, went through a process, could not be rushed or happen prematurely. Truth is necessary. I could not allow my sister-in-law to minimize my fault. My friend’s illness was not divine retribution, but it helped me feel for him. Forgiveness comes from the heart. When the offender *isn’t* sorry, the injured party needs to reach some level of forgiveness to find freedom.

Moments of forgiveness are precious. They manifest Christ’s love in our lives. They require hard work and (for me) the support and encouragement of friends. The Lord’s prayer seems not quite accurate in saying, “forgive us *as* we forgive those...” God does not withhold forgiveness until we do our duty. It’s more like “forgive us *so that* we may forgive.” Not instant or easy, it is worth the effort. There we find peace. By taking the risk of spending the talents and wealth of our hearts, we gain so much more than we lose. Instead of losing the gold, our earthen or clay hearts become gold. By forgiving our neighbor we become fully human. By giving and receiving forgiveness we become—don’t you think, just a chink?—like God, divine.

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